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A Great Friggin' Swindle? Sex Pistols, School Kids and 1979

Richard Osborne

This article examines the popularity of the Sex Pistols' song "Friggin' in the Riggin'" and its parent album The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle. It argues that in 1979 the Sex Pistols attracted a new and younger audience, one that has been neglected in previous studies of the band, which tend instead to focus on the years 1976 and 1977 and the band's original coterie of followers. This article locates the teenage appeal of "Friggin' in the Riggin'" in its themes of swearing, sex and piracy. It also explores the media infrastructure that enabled young adolescents to access this music. Following on from this, the article charts the triumph of Johnny Rotten's Sex Pistols' narrative over that of Malcolm McLaren. The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle fell prey to notions of authenticity, coherence and the canonical tastes of young adults.

It's time to come clean: I have repackaged my past. True enough, my first exposure to the Sex Pistols' music came on the day of the Queen's silver jubilee in 1977. Following a celebratory village fete, one of my brother's friends called up and played the two of us "God Save the Queen" via the telephone. I have recounted this story on many occasions, suggesting I was synchronized with a significant pop cultural moment. I should now admit that it wasn't this record or this moment that made me a fan of the band. I was at primary school in 1977 and was too young to appreciate Johnny Rotten. The first song to draw me towards the Sex Pistols was issued on 23 February 1979, when I was nearly 12 years old. It was "Friggin' in the Riggin'."

"Friggin' in the Riggin'" is disappearing from the Sex Pistols' story. Where it was once of enough importance to close *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* film and one of the

versions of the soundtrack LP, it has no place on recent greatest hits albums. Despite the wealth of retrospective analysis about the Sex Pistols, this song has barely received a mention. In statistical terms this can be considered unjust. “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” was part of the group’s biggest selling single in the UK. Coupled with “Something Else” this record sold 382,000 copies (“T-Zers” 55).¹ This was the only Sex Pistols single to sell more than quarter of a million copies (ibid.).

The downfall of “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” began at the moment of its release. In February 1979 the Sex Pistols entered the law courts. At stake was the band’s future and legacy. On one side was the manager, Malcolm McLaren, who was purveying the idea that the Sex Pistols were a symbolic entity he could do with as he wished. For him the idea of the group was more important than any individual member, a line of thinking that can be seen in the advertising for “Friggin’ in the Riggin’,” which declared “The Sex Pistols are an attitude not a band” (“Advert” 31). On the other side was Rotten, the former lead singer, who was hoping to debar McLaren from “passing off” as Sex Pistols anyone other than himself, Steve Jones, Paul Cook and Sid Vicious (“Receiver” 1). Rotten’s action had its roots in his exit from the band in early 1978. He opposed the band’s subsequent output and was not part of any new songs recorded for *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* LP. Instead, as *Melody Maker* reported, his “sense of outrage was directed precisely against such pompous artefacts as ‘Swindle’” (Goldman and Hucker 27). “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” was one of victims of this fight.

The song is a long way from Rotten’s vision for the group. Although “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” doesn’t feature any of the replacement vocalists that litter the Swindle project, the number of “real” Sex Pistols taking part is limited to Jones and (possibly) Cook. In place of the “year zero” punk of *Never Mind the Bollocks*, the song’s origins can be traced back at least as far as the 1890s (Cray 318). It was termed “Anarchy in Antiquity” by *New Musical*

Express (*NME*) (Baker 23). Rather than being a threat to the establishment, it is a tune that some sectors of the establishment have embraced: its nautical themes have made it a Royal Navy staple (*ibid.*). Far from being a cry of working class consciousness, it has associations with the middle class sport of rugby union. This helped to make it a target for the music press. *NME* dismissed it as “a reading of a rugby song against some incidental orchestra twiddling” (*ibid.*), while *Melody Maker* condemned the Sex Pistols for singing “antique pre-adolescent rugby songs” (Goldman and Hucker 27).

It was not inevitable that Rotten’s version of the Sex Pistols’ story would win out. While he was fighting for the reputation of the band, McLaren was fighting for the *lack* of reputation of the band. McLaren wanted to continue the outrage, the surprise, and the overturning of popular music logic. His remodeled Sex Pistols were successful too. “No One Is Innocent,” the June 1978 single with Ronnie Biggs on lead vocals, was well received by the British music press: *Sounds* made it single of the week (Evans 54), while *NME* noted “what remains of Los Pistoleros swaggers out in fine style” (Carr 24). The other side of this single, Vicious’s interpretation of “My Way,” was praised further still.

Throughout 1978 and early 1979 the British music papers maintained a keen interest in the Rotten-less Sex Pistols. Moreover, 1979 can be regarded as the group’s most successful chart year in the UK. The Sex Pistols had three top 40 albums and four top 30 singles, two of which made the top three. However, it wasn’t just long-term devotees who were buying these records: there was also a younger generation who developed an interest in the band. These young fans came on board *after* 1977 and initially had more familiarity with Sid Vicious than with Johnny Rotten. These were the consumers who fell for the “swindle.” If my own school is anything to go by, they fell for “Friggin’ in the Riggin” hardest of all.

By re-examining the popularity of “Friggin’ in the Riggin” and *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* I hope to provide a voice for the punk newcomers of 1979. Because little has

been written about this audience, I will be drawing on a greater amount of personal reminiscences than is the academic norm. The following article is divided into two sections. In the first half I will explore some reasons why my peers embraced “Friggin’ in the Riggin’.” Its level of maturity matched that of our age group, and the song keyed into punk themes of swearing, sex and piracy. In the second half I will examine why *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* was eclipsed and Rotten’s vision of the Sex Pistols triumphed. Judicial decisions weren’t wholly responsible. McLaren the *auteur* paled against Rotten the artistic genius; the tastes of late adolescents held more sway than those of young teens; Rotten was carving out an identity while McLaren’s rudderless pirates were going nowhere.

1. The Golden Age of “Friggin’ in the Riggin’”

With “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” many of McLaren’s plans for the Sex Pistols coalesced. He wanted a young audience, he wanted to promote scandal, he wanted to undermine the record industry, and he wanted a group that would rival Scottish pop sensations the Bay City Rollers.

It seemed odd at the time and can seem stranger today, but the Bay City Rollers were McLaren’s template for the Sex Pistols. This was true from the launch of the band (prior to the hiring of Rotten he drove to Scotland in search of a Rollers-type singer) (*Savage England’s* 99) to the time of their demise (in 1980 he looked back upon the Sex Pistols, saying “I was always concerned to make them as much like The Bay City Rollers as possible”) (Rambali 28). The Bay City Rollers were Britain’s most successful pop group of the mid-1970s. Even their most ardent supporters, however, would be likely to admit they were anodyne.² The group’s biggest hits came with cover versions (“Bye Bye Baby”) and meaningless chants (“Shang a Lang”). This was not anarchy in the UK.

And yet, if we take music out of the equation, there are similarities between the two groups. McLaren originally saw the Sex Pistols as an adjunct to his shop, Sex. The Bay City Rollers, with their tartan-clad followers, provided a blueprint for how to sell clothes (Garnett 24). The Rollers' manager, Tam Paton, was described as a Svengali. For him the group's image was more important than any individual member; there was a succession of line-up changes throughout the Bay City Rollers' lifespan. The group appealed to young teens and pre-teens. McLaren was interested in the same market: he wanted the Sex Pistols to be a "genuine teenage group" (Savage *England's* 122) and believed younger school children would "take over this entire music scene" (Rambali 28).

But was McLaren able to reach this crucial demographic in 1977? In this "year of punk," the genre and its adherents received a great deal of media attention in Britain in both the mainstream and the music press. It has nevertheless been argued that punk failed to become the "next big thing," either 1977 or in 1978 (Laing 32-40). Although the musicians and fans were being written about, the music was not widely heard. Younger children, in particular, had restricted access to it. It was not being transmitted to them and it was difficult for younger teens and pre-teens to witness it live.

One of the regular observations made about punk in Britain is the slow speed with which it moved from its city bases to the rest of the country. Jon Savage has suggested that it was mid-1978 before the music started "spreading nationwide" (*England's* 484) and Simon Reynolds has talked of punk's crawl from "metropolitan bohemian elites" to the "suburbs and the regions" (xvi). Brett Anderson, the singer from Suede, has talked about coming to punk late, noting "musical scenes seeped very slowly through the country before the internet" (Rogers). There is an implication here that punk was spread organically, as though it was orally transmitted from town to town. Long before the internet, however, Britain had a national media infrastructure that was effective at transmitting musical information at speed.

In the late 1970s the most popular shows on BBC's Radio One had more than 5 million listeners ("Rosko's" 12). Music television also gained large audiences: the weekly chart show *Top of the Pops* had around 15 million viewers (Gittins 28). McLaren regarded these media outlets as being key to the younger audience: "What sells records is plays on the radio . . . what sells records is if you were on TV last week" (Utton).

In 1977 and 1978 punk was not receiving much daytime radio airplay. Doreen Davies, who controlled the Radio One playlist, would later defend her restrictive policy: "if young people were listening to Radio One at the crack of dawn while they were getting ready to go to school and the parents were downstairs doing the breakfast you didn't want punk rock, because someone's going to say 'turn that rubbish off'" (Whalley). Punk also suffered from a circular process whereby it was not being played on daytime radio because it hadn't had many hits, but it wasn't having hits because it wasn't on the radio. In 1977 there were only 11 punk top 30 hits in the UK; in 1978 there were 17, only six of which came in the first half of the year.³ In terms of national broadcasting, punk was largely restricted to John Peel's show on Radio One. This program had a significantly smaller audience than the breakfast show, averaging around 200,000 listeners ("Rosko's" 12). It was also broadcast too late in the evening to reach younger schoolchildren. It had a slot of 10.00pm to midnight, Monday to Friday.

The music was confined in other ways. Much of the early television coverage was regional. The Sex Pistols' December 1976 interview with Bill Grundy on the *Today* show was only transmitted in the London area. *So It Goes*, which featured the first filmed performances by many of the bands, including the Sex Pistols, was broadcast in just three out of Britain's fourteen commercial television regions. The music was primarily sold in specialist stores: the leading multiple retailers - Woolworths, Boots and W.H. Smiths - would not stock the most controversial Sex Pistols records (*Savage England's* 349, 415). And while

the music received a great deal of coverage in the music press, this was primarily in the “inkies”: *Melody Maker*, *Sounds*, *Record Mirror*, and *NME*. The specialist shops and the inkies were the preserve of older adolescents: the latter, for example, were targeted at readers with an average age of 18 (Frith *Sociology* 151-52).

Things changed in 1979. In this year there were 29 new punk Top 30 hits, plus two that had first charted in late 1978.⁴ I was one of the new purchasers of this music. My enthusiasm was shared with and inspired by many of my classmates at school. More broadly, it appears there was a new generation of punk fans throughout the UK. There were various reasons why youngsters embraced punk and became fans of the Sex Pistols in particular. One was the headline-grabbing death of Sid Vicious in early 1979. Vicious was a cartoonish figure; the broad strokes of his actions were easy fodder for playground conversation. “Something Else” was a successful attempt to cash-in on his death. One of the adverts for the single featured a coffin-encased Sid Vicious styled as an Action Man, its exploitative nature aimed squarely at children (Watts “Great” 9). Reviewing the record in *Melody Maker*, Simon Frith suggested it was “Great teenage party music” and accurately predicted “a huge, huge hit” (“Singles” 24).

Another reason for the new juvenile popularity of punk was the launch of the magazine, *Smash Hits*. This publication was aimed at young readers and featured posters and song lyrics alongside interviews with bands. Its first editor, Nick Logan, had previously helmed *NME* but set up *Smash Hits* with the view that “there was this bunch of punk and new wave bands photogenic and musically sharp enough to reach a new and younger audience”; he welcomed the opportunity “to be a little bit subversive in the unchallenging and patronised teen market” (Ware). From September 1978, when *Smash Hits* was launched, until December 1979 punk and new wave acts were cover stars for more than two-thirds of the magazine’s

issues. Logan's policy was successful: by June 1979 *Smash Hits* had a circulation figure of 166,000 (Hill).

Perhaps more surprising, although coming from a similar angle, was the way that British television turned towards punk. While punk's sounds were too abrasive for daytime radio, its spectacular visuals were suited to TV. *Top of the Pops* encouraged several of the bands. One of the show's rules was that a song could only be featured if it was in the top 30. During the late 1970s, however, each episode highlighted one new release, promoted ahead of its chart appearance. In May 1977 the Stranglers were the first punk band chosen for this slot, performing "Go Buddy Go." With such support it became the best selling punk single of the year. The Sex Pistols were treated differently. Although they had four top 10 hits between June 1977 and July 1978, only the video clip for "Pretty Vacant" was shown.

By 1979 punk bands were performing on *Top of the Pops* nearly every week. Rather than being outsiders, Lavinia Greenlaw has suggested it now "seemed like their natural home" (Newton). Moreover, it wasn't just palatable new wave groups that were featured. In 1979 *Top of the Pops* hosted performances by the Damned, UK Subs, Ruts and Angelic Upstarts, as well as showing the "C'mon Everybody" segment from *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. A wider range of punk bands was being more widely heard. *Top of the Pops* not only reflected increased punk single sales, it amplified them. As Martin Parker has pointed out: "the higher a record is in the charts, the more media exposure it will obtain and thus the more sales, and so on" (Parker "Reading" 208). It was in this context that punk gained its 31 top 30 hits in 1979. These records were easily accessible as well: Sex Pistols singles were now being sold in Woolworths.

The young adolescents of 1979 did not have to join a subculture to experience punk; the music was now part of their everyday lives. My own school in rural Worcestershire was awash with this music. During the early months of our fandom it was the mainstream media

that set the parameters of our listening: the punk bands that we followed were those who had made the charts. And while we were addressing punk, some of these bands were addressing us. Children's themes were captured in singles as diverse as Siouxsie and the Banshees' "Playground Twist," the Undertones' "Jimmy Jimmy," the Dickies' "Banana Splits," and XTC's "Making Plans for Nigel." "Friggin' in the Riggin'" was a notable case in point. Journalists derided the track, but in doing so pinpointed its childish appeal. *Melody Maker* and *Music Week* both called the song "puerile" (Savage "McLaren's" 27; "Sex Pistols" 32). *NME* dismissed the song as being one "you learn behind the infants school bicycle sheds when you're about eight or nine" (Parstein and Burchwood 34). I don't think any of my classmates knew this traditional song prior to the Sex Pistols' version. It did resonate with our bicycle-shed culture, however. "Friggin' in the Riggin'" was widely available but had the appeal of being illicit. It wasn't material that could be broadcast on daytime radio and its lyrics weren't suitable for publication in *Smash Hits*. It was a record that was known only to insiders, and yet it wasn't hard to be one of these insiders: "Friggin' in the Riggin'" was a rumor that spread all over school.

Although most music journalists looked down upon "Friggin' in the Riggin'," it was a song that chimed with children's understanding of punk. The Sex Pistols achieved national fame, not through their music, but through swearing on the *Today* show. Cook has said, "a four-letter word done everything" (Temple *Filth*), while Jones pointed out, "From that day on, it was different. Before then, it was just music; the next day it was the media" (Savage *England's* 260). During the televised interview Rotten swore twice (saying "shit" each time) and Jones swore five times ("fucker," "bastard," "sod," and "fucking" twice). Although initially concerned about the appearance, McLaren quickly embraced the fact that the Sex Pistols had become the "Bay City Rollers of outrage" (Napier-Bell 201). The group adopted the *Daily Mirror's* headline, "Foul Mouthed Yobs," using it in both promotional materials

and song (“Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle”). They continued to swear as well, notably in the title of their first album, *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here’s the Sex Pistols*, and in one of its most disturbing songs, “Bodies”, in which Rotten launches a volley of percussive “fucks” (“Bodies”).

In numerical terms “Friggin’ in the Riggin” goes further still. Its lead vocalist, Jones, first displayed his aptitude for swearing on the *Today* program. The song contains an “ass,” a “tits,” a “fuckin’,” four “bollocks,” “fuck” fifteen times, and “friggin’” 45 times. In its escalating litany of exploits “Friggin’ in the Riggin” also highlights the sexual side of swearing. This chimed with McLaren’s vision for the Sex Pistols. He translated the group’s name as meaning “sexy young assassins,” with “pistol” suggesting both “gun” and “penis” (Temple *Filth*).

In this respect Rotten was a poor choice as vocalist. Tam Paton’s clean image for the Bay City Rollers was undone via a series of sex scandals (Rogan 306-25). McLaren suffered the reverse. His morally upright lead singer undermined the idea of a sexy rock band. Rotten castigated the Sex Pistols’ original bass player, Glen Matlock, who, he claimed, viewed the group as “a camp version of the Bay City Rollers”; Rotten stated, “I’m sorry, I was completely the other way. I saw the Sex Pistols as something completely guilt-ridden” (Savage *England’s* 110-11). His lyrics for “Bodies” take all of the appetite out of sex, an activity he famously described as “just thirty seconds of squelching noises” (Frith and McRobbie 384). In return, McLaren castigated Rotten. He admitted the singer had “the politics and the lyrics,” but argued he “could not project sexually” (Rambali 49). In contrast, he suggested if the group had “any sexuality at all,” it came from Jones and Cook (ibid.). Jones agreed with this prognosis. His analysis of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* film was that “People want to see Sid on a motorbike and me shagging birds . . . They don’t want all the political bollocks” (Watts “Last” 37). In this case, however, it was McLaren’s politics that

were being dismissed. Jones argued that “Joe Bloggs up north isn’t gonna give a shit. ‘E wants a laugh, not to sit there listening to some political crap” (ibid.).

Many in my schoolyard agreed with him. For a short while “Friggin’ in the Rigg’in” was the most popular Sex Pistols song because it was the rudest Sex Pistols song. It was exciting because it needed to be decoded. To discover that “friggin’” meant “fucking” was itself a thrill, and then there were the debauched verses to be worked through and worked out. The same young audience who lapped up “Friggin’ in the Rigg’in” helped *Some Product: Carri On Sex Pistols* to become a Top 10 album in 1979. This record consists of edited versions of Sex Pistols’ interviews. At school, its most popular tracks were its most lewd, notably “Big Tits Over America,” in which Jones and Cook are once again to the fore.

Although the lyrical appeal of “Friggin’ in the Rigg’in” is straightforward, the song does have further layers. The single sleeve depicts the Sex Pistols as cartoon pirates sailing on the Good Ship Venus. This image is derived from *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* film, in which the song is animated with a full piratical escapade. In their hiring and firing from EMI, McLaren had viewed the Sex Pistols as “Robin Hood-ish” (Watts “Four” 39). The “pistols” element of their name hinted at the practices of highwaymen (Laing 45). Pirate imagery maintained this outlaw status, as well as having two main senses on which McLaren could draw. Keying in to the nautical lyrics of “Friggin’ in the Rigg’in,” the sleeve and film portray the group as pirates of the high seas. They are also depicted as advocates of musical piracy. The band is completing a hit and run on the music business: Cook is carrying bags of money.

Piracy is ambivalent. Those who operate it are usually plying the same trade as those who would have them condemned. When it comes to the high seas, the British state progressed from hiring pirates to criminalizing them (Parker *Alternative* 35). When it comes to music piracy, McLaren illuminated the nefarious practices of the industry by playing it at

its own game. *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* was conducted as an exposé. The film's director, Julian Temple, claimed it highlighted "the basic rock 'n' roll swindle of the kids going into a record shop and buying a record with their hard earned cash and getting two hit singles and a mountain of crud" (Bromberg 188).

McLaren wished to expose more than this. One way that copyright industries have fought piracy is by conflating intellectual property theft with socially transgressive crimes. It is suggested that if you buy a pirated record or film you are somehow funding pornographers and terrorists (Krikorian 84). Rather than denying such charges, McLaren used sexual imagery as a means to promote piracy. These elements first came to the fore in "Friggin' in the Riggin'".⁵ The song's lyrics drag piracy to a base level. Its film clip supports this: intercut with the pirate cartoon, Jones can be seen fondling the porn star Mary Millington.

It should not be forgotten that pirate imagery has been aimed at young children. This goes back at least as far as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and was confirmed by J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904). A more immediate parallel with the animated pirates in "Friggin' in the Riggin'" can be found in the cartoon *Captain Pugwash*, which was broadcast on children's television in the mid-1970s. *Captain Pugwash* was subject to urban myth, which suggested the characters had sexual names, such as Master Bates, Seaman Stains and Roger the Cabin Boy ("John Ryan"). This children's cartoon would become enmeshed with "Friggin' in the Riggin'." Student rag mags, which had been the source of the original myth, went on to depict the Pugwash crew as characters on the Good Ship Venus ("Can Anyone").

"Friggin' in the Riggin'" was the right song for the right age group at the right time. It brought together the child-friendly punk themes of swearing, smutty sexuality and piracy. The single that it was featured on sold twice as many copies as "God Save the Queen," the most successful Sex Pistols release from the Johnny Rotten era. And yet, like many other Sex

Pistols fans, it is Rotten and “God Save the Queen” that I now turn to when I think of the band. The question remains: why?

2. The Sinking of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*

After Rotten left the Sex Pistols in January 1978, he and McLaren gave increasingly divergent accounts about the group. Rotten portrayed the original Sex Pistols as being “authentic,” as far from the Bay City Rollers as it was possible to be: “can you imagine Johnny Rotten singing ‘Shang-a-Lang’?” (Temple *Filth*). McLaren, in contrast, cast himself as the author of the band: “creating something called the Sex Pistols was my painting, my sculpture, my little Artful Dodgers” (ibid.).

Despite these differences, the two characters famously had much in common. Jones suggested “they’re the same kind of personality” (ibid.), while Jon Savage argued the “similarities between Lydon and McLaren were evident” (*England’s* 523). These similarities were physical as well as personal. On seeing a picture of the young McLaren, Rotten conceded, “He looks exactly like me!” (ibid. 46). There were also correspondences between their new musical projects. *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* is focused on the selling of the band, their transformation into product, and the exploitation of their fans. Rotten’s post-Sex Pistols band, Public Image Ltd (PiL), also highlighted commodification processes. They were set up as a business and the packaging of their first records mimics newspapers and glossy magazines. Both McLaren and Rotten remained tied to the same record company: Richard Branson’s Virgin Records.

Johnny Rotten’s version of the Sex Pistols’ story now has the upper hand. It has become common to depict his exit spelling the end of the group. His 1993 autobiography culminates with his final Sex Pistols show in San Francisco (Lydon 341-42). The same is true

of Temple's "corrective" Sex Pistols' documentary, *The Filth and the Fury* (2000), which pulls off the anachronistic trick of featuring Vicious's death but still finishing with Rotten's exit.⁶ This historical framing wasn't in place in early 1979. Many people viewed the Sex Pistols as an ongoing concern, even if the status of some band members was indeterminate. Vicious had left the group, but McLaren was in certain ways still operating as his manager. He also had control of his recorded material, due for release on *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. This was of importance, because at this time Vicious was arguably a bigger star than Rotten. He was certainly gaining more press attention.⁷

At the beginning of 1979 the balance of power between Rotten and McLaren was fairly even. Rotten had the backing of Virgin, who viewed him as their "hottest property" and provided ample funds for his experimental music (Reynolds 9). PiL's first single, "Public Image" had been an artistic and commercial success (and was featured on *Top of the Pops*) but their debut album, released in December 1978, was less well received: *Sounds* gave it 2 ½ stars out of 5 (ibid. 11-12). McLaren, in contrast, had a less comfortable relationship with Virgin. He did, however, have ownership of the Sex Pistols name, due to clause 14 of the management contract, which stated "the name 'Sex Pistols' was created by the Manager and that such name belongs to and is owned by the Manager" (Savage *England's* 226). By the same means he had control of the name "Johnny Rotten," hence the singer reverted to his real name, John Lydon, for PiL (Reynolds 9).

And which was more punk? If the idea of the Sex Pistols had been to revolutionize the music business, McLaren's vision was more radical than Rotten's. McLaren was now calling the singer a "collaborator" (Savage *England's* 467). He felt that Rotten was colluding with the music business, which portrayed him as an outsider and a genius artist. This was the sort of rebellion the industry could turn into money. Jon Stratton has written about the "commercial/aesthetic/charismatic significance of artists such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon

and John Lydon,” where the “emphasis on the individual, which *apparently* contradicts the need for standardisation of product, actually enables the industry in its present capitalist structure to survive” (155).⁸ It does so because artistic individuality is a means of increasing the desirability of mass-produced goods. Rotten might have attempted to highlight commodification but the marketing of his singular genius deflected attention from this process. This was precisely the sort of practice *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* sought to expose. Temple spoke of fans being swindled into “buying a worthless piece of plastic because they’ve been fed this bullshit about some larger-than-life demigod who’s going to instill them with a bit of wisdom” (Bromberg 188).

While Rotten was being presented as a figurehead, *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* was undermining the idea of the organic group. The film and record portray the Sex Pistols with a succession of lead singers: Rotten, Vicious, Jones, Cook, McLaren, Biggs, Tenpole Tudor. Members come and go, just as they had done in the Bay City Rollers. However, if the various Rollers were part of an ever-changing same, the Sex Pistols are presented in a manner that is more unstable. They are rendered in cartoon form and transformed into products: Vicious becomes an Action Man and a burger; Jones and Rotten are molded into chocolate. Their repertoire is all over the place as well, ranging from rough demos (“Johnny B Goode/Roadrunner”) to showbiz standards (“My Way,” “You Need Hands”). In addition, a retinue of orchestras, buskers and disco acts perform cover versions of their songs.

All of this is bewildering, but it was also potentially brilliant. Savage stated, “ideas crackle from the record” (*England’s* 536). In the opinion of Jamie Reid, who had a major hand in the styling of the project, “the best Sex Pistols’ product was *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*” (Reid and Savage 85). The record and film exposed the marketing of popular music; they questioned the construction of pop groups; they even dared to challenge the Sex Pistols’ followers, particularly those who were putting too much faith in Rotten’s charisma.

McLaren relished this new audacity: “How *could* you have a 55-year-old guy [Biggs] as a pop star? You could have anyone. It was that perversity that was wonderful, it gave pop music lifeblood” (Rambali 49). For Temple, “probably the most interesting swindle of all is the way in which the film was designed to swindle an avid fan of his expectations, destroying the fans’ illusions about the Sex Pistols” (Bromberg 188-89).

Andrew Goodwin argued that all acts “who are marketed as a self-conscious hype” are doomed to failure (267). Such hype didn’t initially trouble the young fans who came to the Sex Pistols via *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*. In 1970’s Britain much of children’s music consumption was tied in with television. As such, young adolescents were used to seeing stars in unrealistic situations (miming to songs in outdoor locations) or rendered in different forms (there was a long tradition of music being aimed at youngsters via cartoons and puppetry). To this audience, the singers of the Sex Pistols’ tracks didn’t always matter. Interviewed in early 1979, Steve Jones stated “I walk down the street and see these little punk rockers about 13 and they don’t even recognise me” (Bushell 31).

In the early 1970s Simon Frith made a study of children’s musical preferences in a British school. He noted the difference between younger pupils, who “emphasised beat and sound in their tastes rather than meaning,” and older sixth-formers, who would scorn “commercial” music, Radio One and *Top of the Pops* (Frith *Sociology* 40-41). This held true at my school as well. It was sixth form students who were supporting Johnny Rotten. It was also the case that, as we got older, my year group began to feel Rotten’s pull. It was not inevitable, however, that either audience would take the singer’s side. Although there has been much focus on authenticity within popular music studies, it is not the only means of musical appreciation. There is a counter-tendency: the admiration of *auteurs*. The public has embraced constructed projects and “artificial” products, but this has tended to work best if they believe there is a guiding, artistic hand behind them.

This *could* have been the case with *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. The film and album provided McLaren with an opportunity to present the Sex Pistols as his own art project. Some reviewers commented on his assumption of a central role. Silverton, for example, described the soundtrack as being “Malcolm’s first ... solo album” (38). The remaining Sex Pistols had a limited hand in the material. Vicious had to be coerced into recording “My Way” (Bromberg 187) and Jones was presented with “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” as a *fait accompli*: “Everyone kept saying you must remember that from school but I didn’t. First time I heard it was about a month ago, ‘cos I bought this book and copied the words out” (Bushell 31). Temple talked of McLaren’s increased desire to place himself at the centre of things: “Rotten was the singer, but really Malcolm wanted to be the singer; now he also wanted to be the director” (Bromberg 189).

What thwarted his project was that it didn’t cohere into an artistic whole. There were several problems. It is possible to argue that McLaren didn’t have *enough* control of the Sex Pistols. Jones indicated the limited nature of his leadership, stating “E didn’t tell us every move, like the Bay City Rollers” (ibid.). Rotten vacillated between arguing his work in the Sex Pistols was his own vision (“you don’t create me: I am me”) (Temple *Filth*) and that McLaren had too much power (in the song “Public Image” he claims that his former manager treated him as “property”) (“Public Image”). Temple has suggested it was originally “a big fucking joke” that McLaren took “these pieces of clay from plasticine boxes which he modelled away to create Johnny Rotten,” but suggests the manager ended up taking this idea “too much to heart.”⁹

Crucially, McLaren didn’t have enough *quality* control when it came to the songs. Music fans will place their faith in *auteurs*, but only if those *auteurs* have faith in their music. McLaren’s interests lay elsewhere. As Michael Watts stated, his “views about art were never to include rock music” (“Man” 51). He was more interested in the film and in the packaging

of the band. McLaren did once argue, “You’ve got have a good tune,” but added, “you need something else. It’s how you *use* the good tune, how you *live* it. The answer is, ‘get yourself a Daily Mirror headline’” (ibid. 50). By the time of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* many viewed things the other way around. The group could still grab headlines, but were running out of good songs. It didn’t help that McLaren and Temple were suggesting as much. *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*’s exposure of the fact that albums contain “two hit singles and a mountain of crud” might have been brilliant conceptually, but it was not great for fans left with crud in their hands.

McLaren also failed to explain the project properly. There were good reasons for this. *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* album was issued 26 February 1979, three days after its lead single, “Something Else” / “Friggin’ in the Riggin’.” In the same month Rotten’s case made it to the courts. He challenged McLaren about the status of the group and the state of the group’s finances. McLaren lost on both counts. The contractual agreement between the two parties was terminated and the group’s assets placed in the hands of “an independent and reliable outsider” (Bromberg 196). Rather than promote the soundtrack, McLaren chose to exile himself in France. There was no one left within the group to perpetuate his vision. Vicious died of a heroin overdose on 2 February. Jones and Cook originally supported McLaren in the case – they described him as an “excellent manager” – but defected to Rotten’s side in the latter stages (“Receiver” 4). They half-heartedly tried to continue the band with new singers – Jimmy Pursey was auditioned at one point and there were rumors that Rotten would return (“Pistols to Re-form” 3) – but issued no new material for the rest of the year. In Jones’s case he admitted that he was also “totally fucking out of me mind on heroin” (Bromberg 195).

As a result of the court case McLaren ceded control of the film. *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* movie had been unfinished at the time of its soundtrack’s release. The court

case nevertheless regarded it as the group's chief asset, a project that could repay money that was owed to the Sex Pistols and Virgin Records (Bromberg 196). McLaren was galled that Branson, who he viewed as an enemy, was gaining a share of the film (Watts "Great" 9). His reaction was to write to the Official Receiver requesting that his own association with the movie be terminated ("Pistols to Re-form" 3). Temple, with whom he had already been working, assumed overall control of the project.

It is difficult to know which elements of the film are Temple's and which are McLaren's. Shortly before the film's release the director stated, "Many of the thrilling ideas are his, but he was not very good at organising them" (Watts "Last" 36). McLaren condemned the finished movie, stating "it is not a *great* film, but might have been had it *not* been for the incompetence of Julien Temple" (McLaren 7). He maintained that "its *theme, script, construction, attitude*, and, above all, *style*, was *my own*," but that Temple had "bodged so many scenes" (ibid.). In McLaren's opinion, "Where there was humour there should have been tears, and where there should have been tears there was laughter" (Rambali 28). Among the scenes that "should have been funny" were "Sid with 'My Way,'" "Sid Vicious screwing his mother" (which was cut), and "The ship at the end" (ibid.).

During the court case, Rotten's legal team employed early scripts from *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* as a means of defeating McLaren. The film had "jokingly" portrayed his managerial schemes, but Rotten's barrister used this as evidence that McLaren "regards himself as the Svengali of these people to do whatever he cares without asking anybody else" (Bromberg 195). Rotten's team campaigned against the salacious and immoral image of the Sex Pistols *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* was putting forth, highlighting its references to Jack the Ripper, the Cambridge Rapist and Myra Hindley, as well as "scenes of incest, necrophilia, group sex and gross violence" ("Receiver" 1). Rotten was successful at promoting his superior morality. Temple complained that people began to think he was "a

saint amongst men” (May 40). In his own court statement McLaren denigrated Rotten’s new persona, suggesting he had previously been the “leading party” in the Sex Pistols’ “unruly, unconventional, and in many ways publicly objectionable image” (Lydon 311-12). Rotten acknowledged he had changed: “I formed PiL because I got bored with the extremist point of view ... I attempted to work more toward a liberal point of view and see if that could slowly but surely change society into something more decent” (ibid. 270).

Why should Rotten’s ascetic saintliness win out against the ribald pleasures of “Friggin’ in the Riggin”? One answer is that he had the support of the mature music press, which revealed its essentially conservative nature by informing readers *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* was a con and the real Sex Pistols resided with the demi-god figure of Johnny Rotten. *Music Week* claimed, “Anyone who followed the Sex Pistols around in their halcyon days in 1976 will be saddened and disgusted by this LP” (“Sex Pistols” 32), while Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill suggested:

Anyone who shelled out hard cash for this double wouldn’t even deserve the title Consumer. “Sucker” would be a lot nearer home. They certainly wouldn’t be a Sex Pistols’ fan ... It’s a cheap shot, this record, leeching for loot off the misplaced nostalgia of kids who could never really know what it was like because they weren’t there. (Parstein and Burchwood 33)

This didn’t mean much to my classmates, but by the end of the year even our own music press was turning against *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*. In December 1979 *Smash Hits* ran an article suggesting that “the real Sex Pistols haven’t existed since January 14th 1978.” It described Vicious as “a coward, a bully and a cretin” and stated: “When Rotten left, Jones and Cook turned to pumpkins. Virgin tried to force that golden slipper on to Jimmy Pursey and Ten Pole Tudor but their smelly feet just didn’t fit it. They should try the easy stuff first – like walking on water” (“Daddy” 11, 12).

Once again Rotten was being described in messianic terms. Many in my year group began to follow him. There were two main reasons why we defected from *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. First, we were getting older. The need for “authentic” music is tied in with identity formation, and the quest for a distinct identity grows more important as youth progresses. Mark Slobin has pointed out, “We all grow up with *something*, but we can choose just about *anything* by way of expressive culture” (Frith *Performing* 274). As adolescents grow older they adopt music and performers who reflect or help shape their own cultural, political and moral beliefs. Frith has argued, “identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are” (ibid.). If artists are going to influence us, we generally want to know they are “for real.” As a result, we need to find out more about them. This quest, as Seth Kim-Cohen has pointed out, takes us to “something beyond the music, something other than the music, something extra-musical” (144). Frith has stated similarly, “‘Authenticity’ in this context is a quality not of the music as such (how it is actually made), but of the story it is heard to tell, the narrative of musical interaction in which the listeners place themselves” (*Performing* 274).

Nevertheless, this search *beyond* music can only be inspired because there is something in the music that resonates deeply in the first place. This leads me to the second reason for the move towards Rotten: the music itself. On this level, he was delivering. Greil Marcus once claimed, “no one has yet seen all the way to the bottom of ‘Holidays in the Sun,’ and probably no one ever will” (11). The depths of “Friggin’ in the Rigg’in,” in contrast, were easily plumbed. The most interesting tracks on *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* were the ones made with Rotten’s line-up of the band. New fans were given a route by which to explore older Sex Pistols’ material.¹⁰ Rotten’s new material was also stunning. If the first album by PiL had been uneven, the material issued in the wake of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* confirmed his artistic status. In May 1979, PiL released “Death Disco,” a

song that combines Tchaikovsky, disco, and the *avant-garde*. In December the album *Metal Box* was released and was “almost universally garlanded with praise” (Reynolds 269).

There was one last problem for McLaren. While my year group was beginning its journey into Rotten’s world, those who were coming up to replace us had no need for the juvenilia of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*. The media infrastructure that had embraced punk found even more suitable forms of music for young adolescents. In late 1979 and 1980 *Smash Hits* and *Top of the Pops* turned to the Two Tone and New Romantic movements.¹¹ Against this background the singles issued from *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle* began to do less well in the charts. When the film was released in 1980 it failed to ignite interest amongst the young. In this respect it was flawed: its X certificate and limited distribution meant that most schoolchildren failed to see it.

End Credits

McLaren’s vision of the Sex Pistols failed to hold to sway because he was wrong in his belief that younger school children would “take over this entire music scene.” “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” didn’t remain popular forever because 12- and 13-year olds don’t stay that age forever. This is only half the equation, however. The original Sex Pistols line-up appealed to a slightly older age group of fans, a demographic that my own generation would soon enter. Rotten was victorious, not just because we were getting older, but also because, when it comes to musical taste, people *do* remain 17 and 18 forever. Psychologists suggest, “Late adolescence/early adulthood seems to be a sort of ‘critical period’ in which musical preferences become fixed” (North and Hargreaves 108).

How could McLaren have got things so wrong? Here we have to think of a wider history of popular music. He wasn’t to know the tastes of rock ‘n’ roll generations would

fossilize in late adolescence: the music itself had only just reached this age. There were two decades between Elvis Presley's first hits and the launch of the Sex Pistols. It was not yet clear how successive generations would age with the music. It should also be noted that the popular music market operated differently from today. In the late 1970s, youngsters *were* the primary purchasers of records. In 1976 more than 75% of records in the UK were sold to those in the 12- to 20-year old age bracket: the Bay City Rollers' demographic bought a lot of discs (Frith *Sociology* 12). Compare this with 2013, when only 12.4% of record and download sales were to 13- to 19-year-olds (Green 74). Moreover, it is not just music fans who have come to develop a late-adolescent mindset; rock 'n' roll may have atrophied at the same age. Some have argued that it was at the end of the 1970s that the music stopped generating as many new forms and instead entered a postmodern phase, cross-pollinating the tastes of its aging audiences (Chambers 200).

It can also be asked: did McLaren get it wrong? *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* wasn't conceived as a product that was built to last. It celebrates the evanescence of commodities and denigrates the cult of fandom. We have become increasingly used to the idea of longevity in popular music and so it now seems odd that some people might have wanted to crash and burn. Temple argued, "we certainly felt very strongly that the myth had to be dynamited in some way; we had to make this film in some way to enrage the fans, not make a film to butter up the legend."¹² What we don't know, however, is whether McLaren wanted to dynamite the Sex Pistols' legend while buttering up his own. Crucially, in the confused gestation and release of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* project it gets hard to read any individual's intentions.

This problematizes the "Friggin' in the Riggin'" cartoon. With both hindsight and foresight it depicts the failure of McLaren's version of the Sex Pistols: its celebration of piracy is also a fable about those pirates' demise. What is more, it is the one segment of the

film that incorporates *all* of the Sex Pistols' members. At its beginning they are on the Good Ship Venus together, but Rotten kicks Matlock overboard. Matlock is eaten by an EMI shark, a representative of the company to whom he was then signed. Rotten suffers a similar fate. McLaren – looking uncannily like the singer - uses a dagger to prod him off the ship, after which a Virgin shark pursues him, just as Rotten had been pursued by Branson in his post-Pistols career. Vicious, with murderous knife in mouth, jumps the sinking ship as it starts to go down. The other members of the band – Cook, Jones and Biggs - are consumed by the waves. Last to go is McLaren, clinging on to the crow's nest. However, we do not know whether this ending reflects his “theme, script, construction, attitude and style,” or if this is why he thought the cartoon sad when it should have been funny.

Notes

¹ Although “Something Else” is usually treated as the lead track, the single is classified as a double a-side. It was listed as such in the UK charts compiled by the British Market Research Bureau and continues to be documented in this manner in chart reference books. The single was also marketed a double a-side. This can be seen in its packaging (“Something Else” and “Friggin’ in the Riggin’” are accorded equal space on the 7” sleeve, with one side each) and in its advertising (it was promoted with a double-page spread in *NME*, with one page given to each of its tracks) (“Advert” 30-31).

² See Garratt (399-409) in which the author recalls her time as a fan of the band. She describes them as “weak,” “atrocious,” and “stupid.”

³ The definition of punk hits is, of course, open to question. In the following I have adopted and adapted Laing’s list of “Punk Singles in Top 30 Charts” (145). In some cases Laing removes new wave performers from his classification, thus acts such as Blondie, Elvis Costello and Ian Dury are not featured. I have extended this, removing other acts who make

his list, but would now generally be termed new wave or who would no longer be considered punk: Boomtown Rats, Tom Robinson Band, the Rods, Jonathan Richman, City Boy, Ivor Biggun. Conversely, I have included two American punk bands who were not incorporated by Laing: Television and the Ramones.

1977: Television, "Marquee Moon"; Ramones, "Sheena is a Punk Rocker"; Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen"; Stranglers, "Peaches" / "Go Buddy Go"; Sex Pistols, "Pretty Vacant"; Television, "Prove It"; Stranglers, "Something Better Change"; Adverts, "Gary Gilmour's Eyes"; Stranglers, "No More Heroes"; Clash, "Complete Control"; Sex Pistols, "Holidays in the Sun."

1978: Rich Kids, "Rich Kids"; Stranglers, "5 Minutes"; X-Ray Spex, "The Day the World Turned Dayglow"; Stranglers, "Nice 'n' Sleazy"; Sham 69, "Angels with Dirty Faces"; Sex Pistols, "No-one is Innocent" / "My Way"; Sham 69, "If The Kids are United"; X-Ray Spex, "Identity"; Stranglers, "Walk On By"; Rezillos, "Top of the Pops"; Siouxsie and the Banshees, "Hong Kong Garden"; Buzzcocks, "Ever Fallen in Love"; Sham 69, "Hurry Up Harry"; PiL, "Public Image"; X-Ray Spex, "Germ Free Adolescence"; Buzzcocks, "Promises"; Clash, "Tommy Gun."

⁴ 1979: Generation X, "King Rocker"; Members, "Sound of the Suburbs"; Skids, "Into the Valley"; Sex Pistols, "Something Else" / "Friggin' in the Riggin"; Clash, "English Civil War"; Buzzcocks, "Everybody's Happy Nowadays"; Sham 69, "Questions and Answers"; Sex Pistols, "Silly Thing"; Siouxsie and the Banshees, "The Staircase"; Generation X, "Valley of the Dolls"; Dickies, "Banana Splits"; Undertones, "Jimmy Jimmy"; Damned, "Love Song"; Clash, "I Fought the Law"; Skids, "Masquerade"; Ruts, "Babylon's Burning"; Sex Pistols, "C'mon Everybody"; PiL, "Death Disco"; UK Subs, "Stranglehold"; Siouxsie and the Banshees, "Playground Twist"; Sham 69, "Hersham Boys"; Angelic Upstarts, "Teenage Warning"; Stranglers, "Duchess"; UK Subs, "Tomorrow's Girls"; Ruts,

“Something That I Said”; Sex Pistols, “Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle” / “Rock Around the Clock”; XTC, “Making Plans for Nigel”; Skids, “Working for the Yankee Dollar”; Clash, “London Calling.”

Interestingly, given his suggestion that punk failed to become the “next big thing,” Laing’s work stops short of 1979. I have nevertheless adopted his policy of not including new wave acts for this year’s list. If new wave acts *were* included, 1979 would still be the year in which there were most punk and punk-inspired top 30 hits. A broader classification would give the following figures: 1977: 17 hits; 1978: 38 hits; 1979: 61 hits.

⁵ McLaren expanded upon these ideas with his next musical project, Bow Wow Wow, who were launched in 1980. The group promoted piracy (via a range of pirate clothing and by advocating home taping) and teenage sexuality (via the young singer, Annabella Lwin, and McLaren’s pedophilic magazine, *Chicken*). McLaren defended the enterprise, stating “What’s wrong with 15-year-olds undressed, fucking, under the blankets with the cassette?” (Robertson 10).

⁶ Temple refers to the film being “corrective” in the director’s commentary of the DVD.

⁷ This included press aimed at children. As part of its late afternoon children’s programming the BBC ran *John Craven’s Newsround*, a news bulletin that reported Sid Vicious’s death.

⁸ For all quotes emphasis is in the original.

⁹ Director’s commentary, DVD version of *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*.

¹⁰ *Smash Hits* both reflected and encouraged this journey into punk’s past. Its early issues included readers’ requests for the words to older songs. Among the many punk songs featured were “Anarchy in the UK” and “God Save the Queen.”

¹¹ This is not to say that *Smash Hits* abandoned punk, post-punk or independent music entirely. In the UK a separate chart for independent record labels was created in January 1980 and was soon published by the magazine, alongside features about some of the groups.

Young readers received information about bands such as Joy Division, Crass, Dead Kennedys and the Fall. The magazine even printed the lyrics to the latter band's album track "New Face in Hell." Thus, *Smash Hits* was one of the means by which my generation began to investigate music beyond the mainstream chart.

¹² Interview with Temple, DVD version of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*.

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